

PROSPECTORS FOUND FORTUNE IN THEIR OWN BACK YARD
by Jane Gaffin

Jane Gaffin is a Whitehorse-based freelance writer who specializes in mining.

(Information for this piece was extracted from Jane Gaffin's *Northern Miner* article of March 4, 1976, and from her book **Cashing In.**)

A prospector is a millionaire--even when penniless.

That's the way Yukon prospector Peter Versluce described the profession of the self-educated geologists who read about rocks all winter and break them all summer.

"Although some people are disbelievers, we're also the best conservationists," Mr. Versluce added. "Not only do we respect the land that offers our living, but we carry white-man food in the bush to keep from killing the wildlife."

Mr. Versluce took the conservation measure one step farther in the winter of 1975. He sponsored a trip and accompanied his Catholic priest friend to their native Holland. Father Henk Huijbers was born in Holland on June 8, 1916, and served as a chaplain for the Dutch army before coming to the Yukon in 1947. He was best known for the many years he served as priest in Mayo and later in Burwash Landing, where he was instrumental in establishing a new rectory and museum.

In Holland, where Mr. Versluce was born in 1907, the two gentlemen showed Yukon wildlife and conservation films to church and school groups. Mr. Versluce, who hadn't spoken his native tongue for over 40 years, said the Dutch language came back immediately. "It was just dormant."

As further proof of Dutch loyalty, a friend later caught Mr. Versluce propped up in a Whitehorse hospital bed drinking a Heineken beer. Five unopened green longneck bottles were lined up neatly on the window sill, cooling. The doctors had prescribed the tonic for the patient's heart condition.

One of Mr. Versluce's personality traits was to start observing the distant white-cloaked mountains in January despite minus 45-degree F. temperatures. A rolled map tucked under his arm as he walked along the streets, he was as restless as a child on Christmas Eve while waiting the first sign of melting snow. But he wasn't going to wait long.

"Rocks are easier to break when they're frozen," teased the delightful prospector who came to the Yukon in 1940, before any network of roads existed. He and his brother, Harry, and another adventurer walked the overland trails for 18 months to reach the Yukon from a starting point at Fort St. James, a town located near Prince George in central British Columbia.

"It was lots of fun, wonderful experience," recalled Mr. Versluce, who had toiled eight years in British Columbia underground mines. "I was one of the first mountain hippies into the country. In the Yukon, I looked for mines so others could do the underground work."

After arriving in the north land on foot, Mr. Versluce was in the Yukon for 12 consecutive years before he accepted an invitation to go Outside to Vancouver as a guest of the Engineers Club. The compulsory necktie was a suffocating experience for a free-roaming prospector. "I fought tying a knot in that tie. Yet I'd spent years tying knots in horse and dog hitches but ended up having to pay a hotel boy five dollars to tie a knot for me so I could slip the tie on and off over my head."

Like so many independent prospectors who would have been good catches, Mr. Versluce escaped the matrimonial knot. Eyes sparkling, he teased, "When things got too close I'd go, leaving no forwarding address. Sometimes I'd rather be eaten alive by a million mosquitos than stay and face the consequences."

On his hike north, Mr. Verslucce said he fell in love with a Stikine Indian princess, and she was offered to him by the Chief. "The first time I couldn't make up my mind, so I ran, sending the Chief a box of cigars. The second time when I went back, I couldn't catch her."

Smile fading, he admitted that years ago the British Columbia mining camps where he worked underground were unsuitable places to take a young lady to live.

Mr. Verslucce was a gentle, mild-mannered soul whose serene disposition let him enter heated frays where angels feared to tread and come out unscathed--usually! He was an animal-lover and the animals sensed it. He could wade into a tangled heap of scrapping canines and break up the most vicious of fights without even a scratch inflicted.

One time his luck changed but it was a spirited pack horse that kicked him in the left side of the skull, leaving a deep and permanent indentation near the eye socket. "But he was a damned good horse," admired Mr. Verslucce without malice.

Although Peter and Harry Verslucce were involved in a number of high-profile mining projects, they are best known and probably were best rewarded for discovering the Little Chief orebody. The Verslucce brothers and partner Chuck Gibbons literally staked claims in their own back yard.

The parcel they optioned to New Imperial Mines included such famous properties as the Little Chief, Middle Chief and Big Chief, as well as the Peter, Oro, Zircon.

The copperbelt extends into where the Verslucce brothers' homestead property housed a group of independent prospectors who constructed their small houses and cabins in a treed nook appropriately tagged as Bachelors' Cove.

"Too often prospectors doggedly hold onto property while waiting for prices on the metal market to go up," Peter explained. "But you have to do a hundred dollars worth of assessment work on the claims every year--trenching, geophysics and so forth. Sometimes it is impractical. It's best to get rid of that property then go look for something else...in your own back yard."

In the 1960s, the prospectors did that. They went out the back door of their homes, built on the fringe of the Porter Creek subdivision west of Whitehorse, and staked in the historic, 17-mile-long, crescent-shaped copperbelt that has been mined since 1898. It parallels the west side of the Alaska Highway and extends from the Carcross Road (Klondike Highway) north to the Crestview subdivision.

In 1967, New Imperial Mines owned a package of 700 copperbelt claims, including properties optioned from the three prospectors. Over the years, various orebodies along the copperbelt were open-pit mined to feed the newly-constructed mill. New Imperial, financed by Sumitomo Metals and Mining of Japan and the Toronto-Dominion Bank, had started open-pit mining the Little Chief on May 1, 1967.

Sadly, the operation had to close in 1971. Copper prices had tumbled below 45 cents a pound on the international market and dictated an 18-month production hiatus until prices struggled upward in 1972.

In a joint-venture agreement, Hudson Bay Mining and Smelting and Anglo America Corporation reorganized New Imperial into Whitehorse Copper Mines, which tunneled underground to continue extraction of Little Chief's deep copper-gold-silver ore to provide feed for the 2,000-ton-a-day concentrator.

"Whitehorse Copper ran quite successfully for 10 years," remembered Dave Tenney, the chief geologist during the underground mine's entire lifespan.

Wages kept pace with inflation; jobs were plentiful and long term. The mine, conveniently located seven miles south of Whitehorse, injected a lot of money into the community. City and territorial government officials appreciated industry in those days.

Whitehorse Copper finally exhausted its ore in 1982, the same year the major economic collapse took its toll on the Cyprus Anvil Mine at Faro, United Keno Hill Mines at Elsa as well as Cantung across the border in the Northwest Territories and Cassiar Asbestos in nearby northern British Columbia.

The historic White Pass railroad, running the 110 miles to Skagway, Alaska, since 1900, did not escape the mining crash, either.

Meanwhile, Bob Hilker, New Imperial's chief geologist from the 1960s, was still praising Peter and Harry Versluce and Chuck Gibbons as good prospectors and very responsible people. "They're extremely honest men who are willing to work out problems and will bend over backwards giving the benefit of any doubt. You just don't find better people."

A common thread running through the three prospectors was personal honesty and integrity and their reluctance to discuss their personal business affairs. They often worked on gentlemen's agreements, as did many decent people of the day. They were good for their word at any time and expected no less from others they met and did business with.

In his mature years, Peter Versluce was still physically capable of outworking anybody in the field. When he saw somebody dragging around, Mr. Versluce would say "he's walking like he has black sand in his boots."

Mr. Versluce kept going full-tilt, refusing to let a heart condition inconvenience him. In mid-August, 1980, he died suddenly of a heart attack while out in the field doing exactly what he loved: prospecting. He was 73. Mr. Versluce was interred in the Pioneers Plot #P-120 of Grey Mountain Cemetery on August 21, 1980.

Mr. Versluce, as well as Chuck Gibbons whose death date is unknown, were inducted into the Prospectors' Hall of Fame in 1988. Their names are engraved in the base of the bronze prospector statue that watches over downtown Whitehorse from Main Street and Third Avenue.

Harry Versluce, whose name is engraved in the statue, was named Prospector of the Year for 1988. Both Verslucses are credited with Whitehorse copperbelt discoveries as well as prospecting work that led to the finding of Canalask Nickel and Canol Mines.

Harry, a long-time resident of Bachelors' Cove in Porter Creek, was born two years after his brother Pete in 1909. Harry passed away quietly on August 15, 2002. He was 93. He had given up his physical labours in the field several years before. But, up to 2001, his avid interest in the mining industry kept bringing him out every November to the Geoscience mining conferences.

According to his obituary, Harry Versluce immigrated to Canada from Holland in the mid-1930s. He worked first as an immigrant farmhand. Then he turned to mining and was certified as a powderman. He became a successful mineral prospector and businessman.

As further proof of his spunk, he was 36 years old when he went overseas with the 4th Battalion, the Canadian Scottish Regiment, serving two years, 1945-46, with Occupation Forces Europe. He earned the Canadian Voluntary Service Medal and Clasp. He was forever proud of having served with the prestigious regiment.

Mr. Versluce was laid to rest with a Yukon Order of Pioneers (YOOP) graveside service at Grey Mountain Cemetery on August 27, 2002.

Both Harry and Peter Versluce generously shared their wealth and quietly donated money to individuals and causes they deemed worthy without any desire for publicity or fanfare. A Versluce Brothers Memorial Fund was established in 2005 with the Yukon Foundation to be applied for the benefit of senior citizens.

* * * * *

Whitehorse-based prospector Allen Carlos sponsored the preparation of this article for posting on this Website.